Christmas Memories

Cruising on "Dream Street"

BACK IN THE '40s, the holiday decorations in our part of east-side Detroit were pretty scant.

So, a bunch of us would pile in a car and ride out to Lake Shore Drive. On one side was huge Lake St. Clair, frozen over and shimmering like diamonds. On the other side, always back off the road, stood the enormous mansions with thousands of lights in every Christmas shape and form. Even the towering evergreens were aglow.

We were awestruck and wondered what it could possibly be like to live in that fashion.

Today, I live not far from that dream street, still making it a holiday treat by taking my grandchildren to see the wondrous display.

I don't wonder what it's like living there anymore—just drive back to our little house, make eggnog and watch the kids open their presents. Nothing can top that.

—Shirley P., Harper Woods, Michigan

The Sawdust Pie

AS CHRISTMAS 1926 drew near in Kittery, Maine, my fifth-grade class at Wentworth-Dennett School became a bit apprehensive.

Miss Remick, our teacher, announced that there would be a Christmas party as usual, but with no Christmas tree in the room. She said it would be a waste and that the tree was better left in the forest.

Instead, she provided a large metal washtub filled with sawdust from a nearby sawmill. Each child brought a well-wrapped present to exchange and attached a long string to it, with a name tag added

to the end of the string.

The presents were then buried in the sawdust, and the tub and contents were covered with paper decorated by the class to resemble a piecrust. Slits were made in the paper to dangle the strings and tags.

Close to Christmas, at a given signal, each student tugged at the string with his or her name tag on it, all at the same time, and presents came flying out through the crust and the sawdust.

An added gift was the good lesson in conservation.

—Vinton P., Pitman, New Jersey

Running the General Store

IN OUR SMALL Missouri town, my family, including a grandfather, an uncle and an aunt, were long-term employees of the local general store.

I can still see the vinegar barrel with its pump and the peanut butter can containing several gallons dispensed by the pound or 25¢ worth.

I remember one cold, dark evening shortly before Christmas, when I was in my teens, a boy came into the store, bought a box of handkerchiefs and blushingly handed them back, saying they were for me.

During the week before Christmas, each customer was given a ticket for a drawing sponsored by the town merchants, who supplied the prizes. After the drawing, chickens, ducks and geese were thrown off a store building, and those who scrambled the fastest had a bird for Christmas dinner.

Later, just as we sat down to dinner, the telephone would ring.

“Hello. This is Barney. Say, you know my road’s been closed with all

this snow, but I'm finally out. Could you open up and let me get my kids something for Christmas?"

—Mary D., Bonne Terre, Missouri

Heartfelt Customs

AMONG THE writings of my grandma Marguerite Gilbert, I found a descriptive and poignant chronicle of Christmases from the 1920s through the 1940s. This part focused on her family's traditions:

"With the passing of years, certain definite customs have woven themselves into the life of the family. Each year, on the first Sunday in Advent, a small box is placed on the kitchen table, and into that box, for each good deed performed by the children, a straw is deposited.

"Then, on Christmas Eve, when the little (Nativity) stable is arranged, the straws are placed in the crib and on the stable floor to bring warmth and love and the joy of remembrance to the Christ child on his birthday. This especially loved custom was learned from Sister Rose Regina of the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, my teacher in the seventh grade.

"And now…in this battle-scarred year of 1942…straws will be placed in the box on the kitchen table…for well-done schoolwork, for help at home, for prompt and cheerful obedience, for clothes and toys neatly put away, for deference to one another's wishes in the matter of radio programs.

"The pennies and nickels placed in a large stocking for several months will be turned into Christmas cheer for some underprivileged family; for the less fortunate ones must be especially remembered at this happy time."

—Jeannie L., Olney, Maryland

Blessings at Shady Pines

CHRISTMAS EVE dawned clear and cold when we set out in high spirits, heading south from our home in Minnesota to spend the holidays with our families in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Clouds soon appeared, and heavy snow fell—so beautiful. Then the car broke down. A passerby notified the Iowa Highway Patrol, and an officer arrived to take us to the Shady Pines Motel before contacting a garage for the car repairs.

We phoned our folks, then settled in for a lonely Christmas. Then someone from the garage called. They'd been closing for the holiday but said they'd work as long as necessary—even all night—to do the repairs.

My husband and I and our four children were getting hungry, tired of the snacks we carried, when carolers were heard outside. We welcomed them in, and they presented us with a tiny decorated Christmas tree.

The carolers had hardly departed before the lady who managed the motel arrived with a sumptuous feast of ham, potatoes, gravy, salad, a fresh-baked apple pie and a full gallon of hot cocoa.

God bless you, Lamoni, Iowa, for a magical, miraculous welcome. To me, you will always be the Christmas spirit personified.

—Velma D., Muskogee, Oklahoma